

A Tale of Two Herptiles

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Casey Shearer Memorial Award, First Place

I remember it was during a particularly grueling night of homework that I opened the freezer door in pursuit of ice cream and was greeted instead by the toothy grin of a baby alligator. There was the desired tub of mint chocolate chip—underneath the small, Ziploced reptile. I didn't bat an eye, though I vaguely wondered where my father had managed to find a perfectly intact hatchling. I lifted the interloper by the not-yet-frozen tail, scooped myself ice cream, and replaced her atop her perch before returning to pre-calculus. I forgot about the episode until my mother mentioned the alligator at dinner the next day.

“Oh that?” My father looked up from his plate, “I found her dead on the side of the road earlier. Isn't she cool? I think I'll try to get the skeleton.”

My younger sister snickered over a forkful of asparagus.

“Well, would you at least put her in the downstairs freezer?” my mother rolled her eyes. The next day my reptilian friend was conspicuously absent from her sentry post over the ice cream, though I had no doubt she remained in the house.

Growing up in my family, I had come to regard such experiences as somewhat quotidian. My father has a Ph.D. in conservation and evolution biology, a M.S. in coral reef biology, and a B.S. in zoology. Over the course of his career as a professor, he taught biology, invertebrate zoology, human anatomy and physiology, animal behavior, and coral reef ecology at various institutions before moving to Sanibel—an island located on the southwest coast of Florida—to start a nonprofit summer camp dedicated to marine education. To me, however, he was a stay-at-home-dad until I was nine. During a period of his life marked by a ponytail and soul patch,

he volunteered as one of my first-grade Girl Scout troop mothers. He capitalized on this opportunity by teaching us all how to properly execute the Heimlich maneuver and deploy a fire extinguisher. By the age of seven, I had received the unabridged sex talk, which included words like “ejaculation” and “zygote”. All of our family passwords are the scientific names of various species of fish. Such is the life of a biologist’s daughter. I have a hard time describing my father to people who have not met him, and he remains unlike anyone I have ever met. He is the type of man who is not above stopping his car to examine roadkill—a mortifying fact I learned to accept early on.

Before the move to Florida, my family lived in the suburbs of upstate New York. There, my mother worked in advertising, and my father mostly stayed at home with my sister and me in between teaching yoga classes to suburban moms and working for the research department of the Museum of Natural History. Our family struck a slightly discordant note in the neighborhood. I could tell my parents never quite felt comfortable amongst the houses with immaculate kitchens that resembled scenes out of a Williams Sonoma double page spread—we were more of Carolina Biological Supply kind of household. I remember one dinner party we hosted (the first and the last) in which my father, mildly tipsy after a few glasses of wine, extracted the DNA from an onion in our kitchen as a party trick. Our neighbors gathered around, awestruck, as he whipped out the family microscope so that they could more readily admire his handiwork.

Indeed, there seem to be few lines my father will not cross when it comes to matters of science. This is perhaps best exemplified by the case of our refrigerators. Throughout the years, family refrigerator units have housed live red tide samples, bacteria cultures, a cat, two rats, two rabbits, various species of birds, countless fishes from ocean and aquarium alike, a guinea pig, a

salamander, a few lizards, and, of course, the baby alligator. These are just the tenants I can remember, although I'm sure there have been others. I shudder to imagine the contents of my father's freezer as a bachelor, before his activities were tempered by my mother's basic sense of decency, but I imagine they were predominantly composed of ice cream and dead animals.

Our unique refrigeration situation stems in part from my father's research and taxidermy ventures, but also from a matter of methodical pragmatism. We have always had a house full of pets; consequently, we have maintained the upkeep of a respectably sized pet cemetery. Facing the problem of overcrowding, my father has found the use of mass graves to be the most practical form of removal—thus the need for a reliable method of preservation. The Egyptian pharaohs had mummification; we have a Frigidaire. This practice eliminates the necessity of immediate funerals, as the deceased can rest indefinitely, paused in frozen peace until we can find time to properly grieve. So streamlined to a point of maximum efficiency was this habit that it did not even dawn on me that it might be considered unusual in some circles. I was taken aback when, as a child, I mentioned the subject in passing to a friend who responded with horror.

In New York, we had only one refrigerator-freezer, which meant that both my father's scientific projects and our improvised pet morgue had to cohabit with the more mundane matters of gastronomic preservation. This made the possibility of accidentally stumbling upon some undesirable frozen object far more likely. I distinctly remember harboring a healthy fear of our freezer as a young child after once accidentally picking up a bag containing a former pet while looking for edamame. To be fair, there is nothing unsanitary about my father's peculiar freezing habits. He bags his specimens and our pets in sealed and labeled plastic bags so that there is rarely any confusion between the leftover burgers and the frozen body of my little sister's guinea pig.

Lest I misrepresent the integrity of our refrigerator-freezer unit—that unlikely harbinger of death—or paint my father as some sort of macabre mad scientist, I should mention that they shared a moment of true heroism in the plight of a salamander in distress. During my first-grade spring break, my family was honored with the privilege of keeping the class pet. Rather than your standard hamster or chinchilla fare, my class had Sal, a nine-year-old spotted salamander who was alarmingly large at around seven inches long. Sal’s reputation preceded her, as we gleefully thrust our slimy pride and joy at any visitor who happened upon the classroom, and though less-than-emotive, the amphibian had her own googly-eyed charm. Every day at recess, we (“we” being myself and the first-grade boys with perpetually skinned knees and unconquerable cowlicks) captured worms to feed our Sal; never was a salamander loved as much.

The family duty of salamandersitting was going swimmingly until disaster struck in the form of an unanticipated cold front. We had just run out of our cache of worms, which was not cause for concern until the ground froze, so that we could no longer dig for more, and the local pet store did not carry any, either. The dirt remained frozen solid while Sal grew visibly slimmer, and my mother began to worry. We had already let my kindergarten class pet (an 18-year-old parakeet; by this point resting peacefully in our freezer) die on our watch the previous year, and she was wary of letting such tragedy strike again. We turned to my father for guidance. After a cursory Google search to make sure he was not completely mistaken, he suggested we send Sal into artificial hibernation by throwing her into the fridge.

“Baby, are you sure this won’t kill her?” my mother hovered over the kitchen counter where my father was prepping Sal for her unanticipated nap.

“Eh, there seem to be mixed results; I guess we’ll find out!”

With that, he unceremoniously stuffed Sal into a Tupperware, poured some mud on her, and sealed the lid, which he had poked full of holes. He christened his masterpiece with a Post-It note: “Don’t move!” I watched in fascinated horror as he proceeded to set Sal on the lowest shelf of our fridge wedged in between the sliced turkey and strawberry jam. I could not push away the sinking feeling that perhaps the same Tupperware would serve as her final resting place—only to be relocated from fridge to freezer during her fatal sojourn in our house. The cold front passed within a few days; the ground thawed; and despite my mother, my sister, and my deep misgivings, Sal emerged from her would-be coffin—sluggish, slow, half-starved, but alive. My father glowed, and my sister and I ran outside to scavenge a worm feast fit for our Salamander Saint Lazarus—back from the fridge.

Sal’s story is telling of a part of my father’s personality I can only assume comes from a lifetime spent in the precise environment of scientific laboratories: he is incontestably prepared to take any action he deems necessary—regardless of how unpleasant it might be. This is not an unfounded suspicion, but rather the result of a seemingly recurrent motif. I became acutely aware of the extent of my father’s ability to separate emotion from obligation at the tender age of eleven when he told me a story from his time at a research station on Guam. While walking to work one day, he had discovered an abandoned litter of kittens in an ants’ nest. The newborn kittens had been eaten alive by ants and were beyond any point of medical salvation—especially when one considers the island’s decided lack of veterinary resources. My father went on to describe how he had gently brushed the litter off, gathered them together, and carried them in a bag lined with rags to his garage—where he proceeded to asphyxiate them using the exhaust from his car’s tailpipe. I cannot recall the specific context leading up to this story, but it is worth noting that earlier the

same year, I had converted to vegetarianism. I was the kind of kid who saved spiders in the classroom for the sole purpose of sparing their meager lives. And my very own father had, willingly and with presence of forethought, executed a litter of newborn kittens. I was appalled.

By my sophomore year of high school, I had mostly successfully repressed all memory of the infamous kitten story until the events surrounding Spot's death. For six years, my parents' camp owned a pet leopard gecko, Spot, whom I befriended. Spot would sit on my shoulder for hours, happily absorbing sunshine when I waited at the camp for my father to finish administrative work. Spot was a magnificent creature with big, green eyes that caught the light and a plump, reticulated tail that swished as he walked. He seemed to enjoy human company and did not object in the least to being held; in fact, his eyes would close in rapture when I rubbed his head with one thumb. Like his species' namesake, Spot was a voracious predator, hunting down live crickets and the occasional mealworm with deadly accuracy.

It was this hunter's instinct that ultimately led to Spot's downfall. It gradually became apparent that Spot was going blind—he started running into the sides of his tank and bumping against the walls of his hut. Spot's blindness meant he could no longer hunt because the live crickets were too fast for him to catch without eyesight. My father tried force-feeding Spot; he tried dangling mealworms in front of his nose; he tried offering him dead crickets—all to no avail. Once again, my family was stuck with a starving pet, though this time the diagnosis seemed considerably bleaker. Spot's little frame waned until you could see each of his tiny ribs, stark against the taut, speckled skin of his abdomen. His once-lusciously fleshy tail shrank smaller and smaller—and then, he was gone. I had heard news of Spot's inability to eat from my father, but I was still shocked when I walked into the camp to find Spot's terrarium suddenly absent.

Suspecting the worst, I tentatively approached my father, who confirmed my fear: Spot was dead. There was something evasive about my father's answer though, and I pressed him for more details. He finally admitted to having put Spot out of his misery.

“How?” I demanded, arms crossed.

“You really don't need to know that. It was quick, and he was in pain.” With that, my father closed the conversation.

Visions of a bloody though efficient decapitation danced through my head as I contemplated what exactly “quick” implied. It was only much later that I learned my father had placed Spot in a small box and laid him to rest in the freezer—a relatively quick death for any cold-blooded creature. Upon learning this information, I was amazed at my own oversight: of course it was the freezer—I should have guessed. What had saved a salamander so long ago had come full circle. Sal had emerged whereas Spot had not; *the Frigidaire giveth and the Frigidaire taketh away*.

As I have grown older, I have often thought of the Guamanian kittens and of Spot. Even upon the most cursory of soul-searches, I know for a fact that I do not possess my father's transcendent rationality. I am weak: I am wholly incapable of separating any immediate sentiment from the greater picture. Much like our freezer, my mind is filled with bags neatly labeled and tucked away for later consideration, easily forgotten amongst more pleasant fare. My father, however, has something that is rare in today's world of bubble wrap, safety warnings, and lawsuits. He could have moved those kittens down the road a little ways and left with the nagging but distant knowledge that they would die, slowly and painfully. He could have watched Spot grow weaker daily, banished to a world of darkness and hunger. Instead, my father chose, and continues to choose, to take matters into his own hands.

In more recent years, we have replaced the old white Frigidaire with a newer stainless steel equivalent, and the outdated model has been banished to the basement for storing mostly beers and frozen hamburgers for staff parties. A third cube-shaped freezer is the latest installment in the unholy trinity that constitutes our complex frozen goods storage system. Here, you can find the less conventional frozen fare, like the Costco-sized box of cream puffs, the frozen samosas, and the now-forgotten lifetime supply of Boca burgers. I also happen to know that there is an alligator hatchling and a beloved leopard gecko resting together in icy sleep somewhere in the depths of this freezer, and the knowledge is somehow comforting.